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ABSTRACT

An introduction to using word processing in writing instruction, this report first describes the basic terms and tools used in word processing and then lists the four characteristics of a good word processing program. They are the options to: (1) edit and insert; (2) cut and paste; (3) find and correct; and (4) store and save documents of between 10 and 20 pages quickly and accurately, with a minimum of user error. It then briefly reviews the advantages and drawbacks of several popular word processing programs and computer books, and suggests what skills teachers will need to help students master word processing. The report outlines what the use of word processing will mean for students, such as learning to write in the computer room, and examines how word processing will affect the three essential components of writing--prewriting, writing, and revision. (MM)

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Using Word Processing in Composition Classes

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The term "word processing" was coined several years ago by IBM as part of an advertising campaign for its office machines. Word Processing has since become a generic term meaning to use a computer as a very smart and versatile typewriter. To the student, word processing offers a totally new method of composing because it allows instant revision, ease of "cut and paste," and electronic spelling checking. Furthermore, to the teacher who teaches writing, word processing also offers immediate access to student writing and the ability to include comments directly in the body of the paper itself. How, then, may a teacher use word processing as a teaching tool for composition?

Before beginning to answer that question, the instructor will need background information. Word processing for most users comes in the form of a microcomputer and a word processing program. The word processing program is recorded on a thin round magnetic film somewhat smaller than a 45 rpm record. This film freely turns inside a protective stiff square envelope. This stiff envelope with its magnetic film is called a "floppy disk" and is inserted into a magnetic read/write mechanism called a "disk drive." The disk drive spins the

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round magnetic film inside its envelope while a magnetic head "reads" the instructions recorded on the spinning magnetic film. As the recorded instructions are read, they are stored in the computer's memory. When a writer composes with a word processing program, the words are typed on the computer's typewriter-style keyboard and appear on a TV monitor screen where they can be manipulated as the writer wishes. After the document is complete, the writer instructs the computer to store the written information magnetically on a second disk called a "text disk." Each document is called a "file." Hence, a text disk will contain one or more "text files." If the writer is satisfied with the text on the screen and after the text has been saved (recorded) on the magnetic text disk, the writer can instruct the computer's printer to print the piece of writing. The printed document is called "hard copy," since the wispy electronic tracings on the text disk are rather "soft," or impermanent. To assure the faint hearted, I emphasize that to learn to use a word processor, the user does not need to know any programming whatever. There are several good word processing programs available, and each comes with a complete set of easily understood instructions (called "documentation"). The good word processing program will also have:

(1) edit and insert modes;

(2) cut and paste capacities;

(3) "find" and "correct" modes;

(4) an ability to store and save documents of between 10 and 20 pages quickly and accurately, with a minimum of user error;

If a word processor can perform several other tasks in addition to the basic four listed above, it is said to be "powerful." The more the program can do, the more "powerful" it is. Since most good word processing programs meet the four

basic requirements, the purchase of a word processing program often depends not upon power, but upon cost and ease of use. My recommendation for Apple computer users who do a considerable amount of writing is to use Screenwriter II published by Sierra On-Line. This word processing program is powerful, yet can often be bought from computer discount retailers for under $100. ScreenWriter II is in the same class as the famous word processor, WordStar. However, it seems to me that WordStar is overpriced, often retailing for $500, and that it is overpowerful, i.e., that the average user seldom calls upon or ever needs its full power. Despite its power, ScreenWriter II is easy to use and comes with a clear instruction manual. On the other hand, student writers generally do not need the full powers of ScreenWriter. Therefore, for student use in a teaching situation, I have found that Sierra On-Line's HomeWord is ideal. It can be bought from a computer discount retailer for about $40 and is very easy to use. The student doesn't even have to read the documentation or listen to the instructional cassette tape that comes with it. With HomeWord, writing can begin almost right away.

There are no composition textbooks that take advantage of or use word processing, probably because the technology is so new that textbook writers themselves are not using word processing. Yet, this lack of familiarity is surprising, since two popular computer books are Writing with a Word Processor by William Zinsser (Harper, 1983) and The Word Processing Book: A Short Course in Computer Literacy by Peter A. McWilliams (Prelude Press, 1982). Unfortunately, neither book actually discusses word processing and composition. Zinsser's Writing with a Word Processor sounds promising, but it is, in fact, only a recount of Zinsser's introduction to word processing on the IBM microcomputer. It won't help in the composition class, except perhaps to serve as a model for good writing. McWilliams' The Word Processing Book: A Short

Course in Computer Literacy is also well-written, entertaining, and laced with good humor, but it really isn't about word processing and composing. So, what is the instructor to do to combine word processing and composition in the classroom? For now, the solution is for the instructor to use personal teaching skills to combine a favorite text with a good word processing program. In so doing, the teacher must understand that while word processing is a new technology, composition is not. The primary goal of a class which is using word processing is not only to master the technicalities of this computer technology, but also to apply the new technology to writing. Therefore, the instructor must be well trained in composition and should be a writer, if not of publishable articles, then at least of personal journals. At the same time, the teacher must be familiar with computers and must be able to use the word processor with ease. In fact, the instructor must be a regular user of the word processor the class is going to work with, whether the choice is ScreenWriter II or some other program. Students are certain to have numerous questions about the program, despite the documentation that may come with it, and the instructor must be prepared to answer those questions. Furthermore, eventually something fretful is going to happen while the student is writing ("My text didn't save," or, "The computer ate my text disk"). The instructor should be prepared to help a distraught student who has been surprised by the computer's Murphyesque performance. For example, because the "text" the student is writing is rather impermanent, the instructor MUST emphasize the importance of using a copy program to make a second ("backup") copy of each draft's text file. Murphy's Law will apply in every case where a student has only one copy of a saved text file. That is, if there is only one copy of a text file, then it is certain to be destroyed. Copy programs are easy to use and are generally standard equipment with computers. For the teacher, the safest procedure is to make copies of each final text file assignment. The best way to do this is through a program called

Documax. Documax is a versatile file management program which allows the instructor to manipulate the students' text files. Its primary value will be in its ability to store a text in about half the space it usually takes (thus saving valuable disk space). Another value is its search capacity, which allows the instructor to find a word or phrase in the students' drafts. Documax also allows the instructor to view (and, therefore, read) a student's text file without having to go back into the word processor.

Students must understand that the writing class which they are taking is different from other writing classes in that a word processor will be used. For the student, the use of word processing means...

(a) Either the school or the student must purchase the word processing program. In either case, an easy but powerful word processing program at low cost is the ideal (hence my recommendation of HomeWord);

(b) Before tackling composition, the student will have to master the word processor. Thus, about two weeks of the course will be dedicated to a task other than composition, except, of course, that composition will be used as part of the learning process. Yet, the student will be concentrating on the word processor itself.

(c) Writing will be done on the word processor. This very likely will mean that the student will have to write during the class time to which the computer room is dedicated, or at other times when the computer room is available. Some students find it difficult to compose in a room where they are surrounded by numerous terminals and the activity that is associated with computer rooms, including whizzes and bleeps from the game users, the curses of the programmer who has just crashed his valuable program, and, in some cases, the constant machine gun sound of the electronic printer. Most students will learn to write in this environment. A few never will learn. Ideally, the student will have a

microcomputer at home. As the computer industry expands, more students will own microcomputers. Otherwise, the computer room will have to be dedicated to the composition class at specified times.

For the instructor, using word processing to teach composition means that electronic technology will affect the three essential components of writing--prewriting, writing, and revision.

Prewriting is that important first step in composition during which the student selects and narrows the topic, creates a thesis statement, and establishes a plan of development for the essay. There are various methods and approaches to prewriting, but they should all include the act of writing. Some students like to brainstorm, while others like to make a list of possible ideas. Some students will jot down key sentences, while some will write an outline of key words or phrases. The consensus among writing instructors is that any method is acceptable if it will help the student to begin writing. In some cases, the student may perform these prewriting tasks mentally. Yet, when a student sits down at the word processor to begin prewriting, the student doesn't face the blank paper and sharpened pencil which leave "hard copy." Rather, the writing medium is, perhaps for the first time in the writer's experience, completely malleable. On the electronic monitor screen, ideas, words, phrases, sentences, even whole experimental blocks of concepts can be written, saved, discarded, recalled, reworded, lengthened, shortened, rearranged, spliced, sliced, and diced, shuffled, discarded again, read, reread, reevaluated, recalled again, saved again and finally printed. The writer finds a freedom in this kind of writing, and the freedom seems to inspire a flow of concepts and ideas in prewriting. Perhaps the key to composition and word processing is in the feeling of freedom. This freedom certainly affects production of rough and final drafts.

After the prewriting, the student then begins the rough draft. It is here that word processing blends writing and revision. Perhaps the student will revise as he or she writes (not really a good idea), or perhaps the student will write as much as possible, then go back to refine the rough draft (a better plan). At any rate, if the student is using pen and paper, the rough draft will contain many arrows showing where to move words, sentences, or whole paragraphs. The draft will contain scribbled notes in the top and side margins, huge crossouts, small crossouts, and other editorial marks, all in the student's own hand. This marked draft the student will recognize as "writing" and will know that "revision" follows. But at the word processor, the student has a new freedom. First of all, the word processor saves each successive rough draft, so that, by the end of the writing process, the student will have a complete series of drafts, each one a bit longer and (hopefully) a bit better than the previous one. A printout of each draft will show the student his or her own progress. Furthermore, the ease of revision frees a student to think. No longer are there arrows and crossouts. Instead, there is a complete ease to the writing, saving, discarding, recalling, rewording, lengthening, shortening, rearranging, splicing, discarding again, reading, reevaluating, recalling again, saving again and, finally, the printing of hard copy. Some students prefer to write and revise directly from the monitor screen. Others will write, print, and revise the hard copy, later entering revisions into the word processor. Either method works. At the end of the writing session, what the student gets is a marvel of modern technology--a neat rough draft, a forerunner to the neat final draft.

Through word processing, the writing instructor has immediate access to a student's writing. In calling up the file from the student's text disk, the instructor can make whatever comments are necessary. Then, by saving the file

with the comments at the appropriate places, the student will have the draft with the instructor's comments. Remember, the student always makes a second, or backup, copy of each file, and, of course, the instructor will make a backup copy of the rough draft and its comments, again through a file utility program such as Documax. Schools which have installed a Novabeam in an auditorium offer a further opportunity. The Novabeam is a camera device which can project a computer monitor image into a large screen. Thus, the instructor can project a student's composition directly onto the large screen and ask the class to participate in discussion and improvement. As suggestions are made, they can be inserted directly into the composition, and when the student gets back the text disk, it will have on it a composition which the entire class has worked on. Since the word processing program will have a "find" capacity, the instructor can mark comments with a symbol such as an asterisk or a dollar sign. To find the comments, all the student needs to do is to have the word processing program search for the asterisk or dollar signs. The student can read the comments directly off the screen, or can print hard copy of only the comments or of the composition with the comments.

As a final step in writing, the word processing student can use a spelling check program such as DICTIONARY by Sierra On-Line. A spelling check program does not automatically correct apparently misspelled words. These programs have an electronic dictionary, normally of between 25,000 and 50,000 words. The program checks each word in the student's composition against each word in its own dictionary, shows the student the suspect words, and asks the student to decide whether or not the words should be corrected. If the writer isn't sure, the spelling check program will show any part of its dictionary through a little window. Thus, the correction of spelling is still under control of the writer. A spelling check program, however, has a limitation: it cannot make a correct

choice between "their" and "there," or "to" and "too," or "might" and "mite." The student will have to know how to use these words. Another interesting program is GRAMMATIK, published by Aspen Software. This program helps a student locate grammatical and structural errors in a composition, including run on sentences, sentence fragments, and other problems. However, GRAMMATIK will run only on a CP/M computer such as the Epson QX-10. This means that Apple users must recognize structural problems on their own.

Most of us remember the various fads in education. I can recall when the overhead projector was supposed to revolutionize teaching. Of course, it didn't. It is possible that word processing will finally prove to be merely a passing fancy. Yet, unlike other so-called innovations, word processing itself does seem to affect writing by making it easier and perhaps even better. Fad or not, word processing is with us and appears to be racing ahead, challenging us to keep up with it, to overtake it, and, finally, to master it.

PS: This paper was prewritten, written, and revised on ScreenWriter II, checked by DICTIONARY, and managed by Documax.